

The Year Without a Summer

by Penny Jones

The first sign of spring in the wood is the swaying of the yellow catkins on the hazel wands. Once they have lengthened and turned brown, pollen blown away, the primroses will be in bloom and the birds will be singing, for territories, mates and nests. Below the hazel on the forest floor strong green bluebell shoots push through the leaf litter. Soon the wood anemones and lady's smock will follow along the stream banks.

Spring is full of promise of new life, but you can still see the bones of the trees and the lie of the land beneath them. You can tell the wood from the trees. The slopes and dips, hedge banks and gullies are etched by shadows cast by the low sun.

Despite wind and rain, growth is triggered by day length and temperature, not by individual weather patterns, we are told. This forward motion seems unstoppable. The season surges on towards king cups and yellow archangel, the first flight of the brimstone, the silent birth of fauns, the emergence of fox and badger cubs, first broods fledging and gnats rising above water, a glut for birds and patrolling dragon flies.

In 1816 what happened here? At least part of the wood was standing. The clues: the pollarded ash trees marking the plot's far corners; the outgrown hornbeam hedges once laid along the boundary banks and ditches; the old oaks with trunks which three peoples' outstretched arms can encircle and the long established bluebells .

That Summer the closing of the canopy did not follow. The shady torpor of August was replaced by a shroud of mist. The annual stasis was not caused by heat but by cold and darkness turning the leaves brown, stopping the growth of seeds and fruits – acorns, beech mast, hips and haws. The insect abundance never came, the caterpillars did not drop from the oaks and the small birds perished. The wood's bones were exposed too soon.

Where did the does lead their fauns to graze in the moonlight with pastures trampled brown by over grazing? Did the young animals creep quietly back into their holes to die if they had avoided the woodsman's snares.

The woodsman with no leaf fodder for his cow, or crops from his garden went hungry; feared for his children and their future, knowing that without acorns the pigs would not be fattened and the jays would be unable to do their planting work. Perhaps though he made some log sales if he had laid sufficient by last winter. As the source of light and heat he became momentarily a village Prometheus.